

Proposed 2005-07 Policy Initiative

Name of Initiative	Family Meals
Sponsor	Children's Health
Lead Staff	Tara Wolff
Other Committees	
Summary	Scientific research continues to verify what many might consider common sense: Families that regularly eat together eat more nutritiously and the children are less prone to high-risk behaviors. While family meals aren't disappearing, the frequency of them is declining. Conduct half day summit to: (1) examine usefulness and prevalence of family meals and (2) propose potential solutions that could be further explored and developed by the SBOH and others.
SHR Strategic Direction	<input type="checkbox"/> Maintain and improve the public health system <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure fair access to critical health services <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Improve health outcomes and increase value <input type="checkbox"/> Explore ways to reduce health disparities <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Improve nutrition and increase physical activity <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce tobacco use <input type="checkbox"/> Safeguard environments that sustain human health
Governor's Initiatives	<input type="checkbox"/> Cost Containment <input type="checkbox"/> Cover all kids (2010) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Healthiest State in the Nation
Possible Partners	DOH Faith Community Business Leaders PTA Youth Organizations (i.e. YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, etc) OSPI Grocery Retailers UW – Donna Johnson CDC – Laurie Anderson WHF
Criteria	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Does the issue involve multiple agencies? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Can a measurable difference be made? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Prevalence, Severity and availability of interventions <input type="checkbox"/> Level of public input/demand <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Does it involve the entire state? <input type="checkbox"/> Does the Board have statutory authority? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Do the resources exist to deal with the issue? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Does the Board have a potentially unique role?

Problem Statement

Scientific research continues to verify what many might consider common sense: families that regularly eat together eat more nutritiously and the children are less prone to high-risk behaviors. While family meals aren't disappearing, the frequency of them is declining. The average number of family meals is three to five dinners a week, but the number declines as kids get older. Recent research shows that 10 to 40 percent of families never or seldom eat together, and that segment is growing.

A national survey has found that children who regularly eat with their families have fewer problems in school and are significantly less likely to get involved in high-risk behaviors such as drugs, alcohol, and early sexual activity. The survey was conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University. The 2003 CASA survey of adults and teens found that teens who ate dinner 5 to 7 times a week with their families were 21 percent less likely to try tobacco or alcohol, 17 percent less likely to try marijuana, and eight percent more likely to get As in school, compared with those who seldom or never shared family meals.

The survey concludes that, "teens who have dinner with their families two nights a week or less are at double the risk of substance abuse as teens who have frequent family dinners."

Another study published in the May 2003 edition of the *Journal of Adolescent Health* verified that adolescents who ate with their families four or five times weekly were significantly more likely to eat more vegetables, fruits, and dairy products.

Research published in the *Journal of Nutrition Educations and Behavior* confirmed that regular family meals improve the nutrition intake of parents as well. Parents also can be important role models for their children. A study by Cancer Research in the UK, found that the more often parents ate fruits and vegetables, the more likely it was their children would have a correspondingly high intake. The same study also found that the earlier children are introduced to fruits and vegetables, the more frequently they eat them. In addition, the study found that children who had been breast-fed as babies ate vegetables and fruit more often than bottle-fed babies.

Besides the nutritional and behavioral benefits tied to eating together regularly, family meals have been shown to improve family communication and are a way to establish or continue traditions and values. According to Michael Schwartzchild, PhD, an APA member (from the Greater New Milford Area Healthy Community 2000's Task Force on Teen and Adolescent Issues) family mealtimes can provide important socializing information, helping children and adolescents "define the ways in which they are going to live." Social skills are also modeled and learned during family meals, "such as table manners, taking turns speaking, and listening to the person talking." More generally, eating together provides valuable information about healthy eating, an opportunity to work out problems and plan activities, and encourages overall good communication and respect.

Potential Strategies

Half-day summit to (1) examine usefulness and prevalence of family meals and (2) propose potential solutions that could be further explored and developed by the Board and others. Potential attendees include business leaders, nutritionists, youth and parent organizations, education leaders, faith group leaders, etc.

Potential strategies identified at the summit might include:

- Education about the value of family meals.
- Grocery store promotions encouraging family meals.
- Workplace policies that make it easier for families to eat together.
- Recommendations about youth activity scheduling to accommodate meal time.

Criteria

1. Does the issue involve multiple agencies?

Yes – see list of potential partners (above).

2. Will there be measurable outcomes as a result of the work?

We could measure against recommendations adoption. We could also check against the Healthy Youth Survey findings to see if there has been a shift in the number of family meals reported by students but it is doubtful that the numbers would change due to one intervention only.

3. What is the prevalence and severity of the health threat and are interventions available?

According to the Healthy Youth Survey in Washington State, when children were asked how often they eat dinner with their family, the numbers drop as kids get older. In 2004, over 10 percent of sixth graders reported that they rarely or never had dinner with their families. Whereas, over 15 percent of eighth graders, nearly 20 percent of tenth graders, and over 25 percent of twelfth graders reported they rarely or never had dinner with their families. These percentages have not improved for eighth, tenth, and twelfth graders from the 2002 survey to the 2004 survey. Over half of Washington's eighth, tenth, and twelfth graders reported that they eat less than three fruit and vegetables a day despite the latest advice included in the new USDA food pyramid. Family meals have been shown to be an effective intervention.

4. What is the level of awareness and readiness on the part of the public, politicians, and professionals to deal with the issue?

Many members of the public have not made the connection between family meals and health and protective factors. However, many members of the public are aware of the obesity epidemic. Politicians and professionals may well be ready to deal with this issue.

5. Is the work statewide in scope?

Yes.

6. Does the board have statutory authority to deal with this issue?

None needed.

7. Are there sufficient resources to tackle the issue?

Yes, potentially.

8. Does the board have a potentially unique role in dealing with this issue or would it be more appropriate for another agency to take the lead?

The Board has a unique role.